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**INNOVATIVE DIPLOMACY: A NEW APPROACH TOWARDS IRAN**

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“For a secure and hopeful life, the world needs innovative approaches and measures. Let us build a collective coalition for peace instead of war.”<sup>1</sup> This quote comes not from Secretary of State Colin Powell or President George W. Bush but from Ali Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although President Khatami was not speaking directly to the United States, his call for “innovative approaches and measures” is exactly what is needed in the United States’ pursuit of a workable and productive foreign policy strategy towards Iran. In the introduction to the 2002 National Security Strategy, President Bush states, “In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.”<sup>2</sup> For the past 25 years, the majority of *action* taken by the United States with respect to Iran has been sanctions, harsh and inflammatory rhetoric, and political isolation, all of which have proven ineffective in making Iran a contributing member of the international community. It is time for new (innovative) *action*. With the shadow of Saddam Hussein removed from the Persian Gulf, the United States should seize the opportunity to come out from its “house on the hill”, and take the first steps in redefining and reshaping its policies and attitudes towards Iran. Instead of relying on a status quo strategy that could be categorized as coercive containment the United States’ “path of action” should be a strategy of cooperative engagement.

An effective engagement strategy must begin with an understanding of what has shaped, and continues to drive, Iran’s attitudes, behavior, and policies toward the United States. Contrary to popular thought, Iranian foreign policy is no longer based on ideology but on national interests and nationalism.<sup>3</sup> There appears to be the misconception, at least among some American policy makers, that the actions of Iran’s foreign policy makers and ruling elite are based solely on rigid and radical religious dogmas.<sup>4</sup> This is not the case. Although Iran’s foreign and domestic policies are constructed with a foundation in Koranic law this does not

mean that Iran's leadership is beyond applying a pragmatic approach to issues related to its national interests.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1988 Ayatollah Khomeini stated, "Our government has priority over all Islamic tenets, even over prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca."<sup>6</sup>

The shift from an ideological based foreign policy to a more pragmatic approach began during the Iran-Iraq war period. Despite the fact that Iraq invaded Iran, Iran was the target of international sanctions throughout the war. To add insult to injury, the West and the Soviets, as well as most Arab states, backed Iraq with money, materiel, and/or moral support. The Iran-Iraq War left Iranians with the impression that the world's major powers, the international community, and their fellow Muslims had abandoned them. Iran emerged from the war acutely aware that their best interests lay in looking out for themselves, and the best way to do that was to establish self-sufficiency in all areas.<sup>7</sup>

Although the war with Iraq hardened the resolve of the Iranian leadership to preserve its independence and maintain its self-sufficiency, Iran's foreign policy has its roots in the 1979 revolution, which deposed the Shah of Iran. The Shah had been put into power as a result of direct U.S. involvement in the 1953 overthrow of the elected Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh. Due to its backing of the Shah the United States was seen as having a hand in all that occurred in Iran domestically and in the foreign policy arena. To many Iranians the Shah was seen as a servant of the United States who subordinated the history, culture, and traditions of Iran in order to maintain favor in the West.<sup>8</sup> When the Shah's rule became oppressive, the United States, by default, was seen as the root cause. When the Shah was overthrown, Iran saw itself not only getting rid of a tyrannical leader, but also eliminating the yoke of U.S. domination. Article 152, of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, clearly reflecting the mindset of the Iranian leadership coming out of the revolution, states:

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defence of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States.<sup>9</sup>

The constitution was written in 1979. The feeling of nationalism, and national identity engendered by the revolution, and reinforced by the Iran-Iraq war, are still very much at the forefront of the Iranian foreign policy psyche today. In his 1997 inauguration address President Ali Mohammad Khatami stated:

The presence of a proud, cultivated and independent Iran at the heart of the world community is the dream of all noble and responsible Iranians. Therefore, it is particularly important for the government to defend national interests; try to promote the integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran according to its historical, cultural, geographic, and economic status. . . . We will have relations with any government which respects our independence, in the sense of decision-making within the boundaries of national interests. But we shall stand up to those powers who want to rule as a master or chief.<sup>10</sup>

Given the aforementioned article of the constitution and the remarks by President Khatami, Iran's national interests can be summarized as follows: maintain its political independence; establishment and maintenance of its sovereignty; and establishment of its leadership role in the region.<sup>11</sup>

Where does Iran see the biggest threat to its national interests coming from? The United States. Fear of domination, particularly by the United States, is one of the major factors that has fueled, and will continue to fuel, Iran's political behavior.<sup>12</sup> Iran's security paranoia is not

without merit; since 1979 Iran has been the target of U.S. sanctions, harsh rhetoric, and threats. What Iran's leadership has witnessed in the past two years has not eased their fears; the United States has already forcibly removed one regime it did not like; the United States has talked about regime change in Iran; and the U.S. has adopted as one of its policies the right to conduct preemptive attacks. From the Iranian perspective, things are made worse by their feeling of "strategic encirclement"-- there are a large number of U.S. forces in countries that border Iran as a by-product of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM; the U.S. maintains a permanent military presence in the Persian (Arabian) Gulf; and Israel maintains a nuclear weapons capability.<sup>13</sup>

Security concerns are not the only thing that has the attention of Iran's clerical and political leadership. Currently Iran is in the midst of an economic crisis. Iran can neither meet the needs of all 700,000 Iranians looking for work annually, nor can it generate the 25 billion dollars needed to make much needed improvements to its oil industry infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> Iran's inflation rate is between 10 to 20 per cent, as is the unemployment rate.<sup>15</sup> The daunting task of improving the nation's economy has served to reinforce in the minds of Iran's leaders that a pragmatic approach in its foreign policy is more practical and beneficial in the end. In an August 2003 address to Iranian ambassadors and diplomats, President Khatami told his audience "To establish economic development and growth, we need to develop methods, eradicate obstacles and establish a suitable atmosphere for foreign investment."<sup>16</sup>

To attract foreign investment Iran has taken a course that appears to be focused on improving its international standing and improving the overall image of Iran and other Islamic countries.<sup>17</sup> A review of Iran's diplomatic efforts over the past few years bears this out. Iran has succeeded in improving relations with Gulf Arab nations, most notably in 2001, Iran and Saudi

Arabia signed a security cooperation pact. In an effort to court the European Union (EU), President Khatami has made visits to France, Germany, and Italy. President Khatami has also met with Pope John Paul II, Hamad Karzai, and most recently, King Abdullah of Jordan. Relations with the United Kingdom have improved to the point of an agreement to exchange ambassadors. In December of 2002, Iran and the EU began formal trade talks that included discussion of EU concerns over Iran's human rights practices and support for terrorism.<sup>18</sup> In October of 2003, the EU and Iran concluded their third round of conferences on human rights. Iran strongly condemned the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Iran even pledged to assist in the rescue of downed American pilots in its territory during the U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan. Iran's efforts to improve its international standing appear to be making some headway with everyone but the United States.

The Bush administration has continued the strategy of containment that began in 1979, the goal of which is to isolate and punish Iran with economic sanctions. In addition to the economic bans imposed due to Iran's inclusion on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, the U.S. also has several sanctions specific to Iran; the Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act, the Iran Nonproliferation Act, and the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act. The U.S. also has imposed bans on trade and investment in Iran, including an Executive Order specifically banning U.S. investment in Iran's energy sector. Although not formalized by law, the Bush administration has adopted one policy that opposes construction of pipelines that carry Caspian Sea energy products through Iran and another policy that opposes Iran's membership in the World Trade Organization. The U.S. has also frozen funds owed to Iran from arms sales that date back to the reign of the Shah.

In 2002, the Bush administration added a new twist to U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran by adopting what it is referred to as a dual-track policy. In an August 2002 speech to the

Washington Institute for Near East Policy Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad, special assistant to the President, explained the policy in this way,

It's a dual track policy based on moral clarity: tell the world specifically what is destructive and unacceptable about Iran's behavior: sponsorship of terrorism, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and repression of the clearly expressed desires of the Iranian people for freedom and democracy, while laying out a positive vision of partnership and support for the Iranian people. . . . U.S. policy is not to impose change in Iran but to support the Iranian people in their quest to decide their own destiny. Our policy is not about Khatami or Khameni, reform or hard-line; it is about supporting those who want freedom, human rights, democracy, and economic and educational opportunity for themselves and their fellow countrymen and women.<sup>19</sup>

Whether the dual-track policy was born out of frustration with the lack of reforms brought about by President Khatami, a realization that containment is not working, a desire to foment revolution within Iran, or a combination of all of the above, is not clear. Even if the intent is to “speak softly” through the dual-track policy, and to “carry a big stick” by maintaining sanctions, it will not work. It will not work because, essentially, nothing has changed with respect to the United States' approach to its strategy with Iran.

The United States' engagement strategy should have as the underlying goal to undermine the hard line clerics' basis for opposition to relations with the United States. The strategy should take into account Iranian nationalism, the struggling Iranian economy, the inherent fear of the United States, and the pragmatic leanings of the Iranian leadership. With this new approach the United States will be able to establish productive relations with Iran that ultimately elicit the type of international and domestic policies and behavior the U.S. seeks.



The easiest first step is for the United States to refrain from the tendency to direct harsh rhetoric and threats towards Iran; this only adds fuel to the fires of nationalism. Needless to say, the “axis of evil” speech was taken as an insult by a vast majority of Iranians. Dr. George Perkovich, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, observes, “Declaring Iran as part of the axis of evil, invoking threats of regime change, and appearing to strangle the country’s technological developments are only the most recent manifestations that make even Western-minded reformers in Iran proudly resist the U.S.”<sup>20</sup> Not only does harsh rhetoric incite passions abroad, it does this domestically as well. If policy makers continue to categorize Iran in a negative vein, it will make the process of establishing relations harder to sell at home and it will make it tougher to get consensus with regard to Iran policies amongst U.S. allies who favor engagement. Tough talk by U.S. policy makers does not scare anybody in Iran it just provides the hard line clerics with more ammunition to espouse anti-American sentiment and weakens the position of those who advocate improved relations with the U.S. At this point, any overt attempts to positively portray Iran will be met with skepticism. To avoid this, the U.S. should merely stop “Iran bashing”, highlight the positive aspects of any Iranian cooperation on issues of mutual interest, and continue the use of Radio Farda broadcasts to promote improved relations with the United States to reassure the Iranian people that the U.S. is not “out to get them.”

The way to get the proverbial foot in the door with Iran is to use the positive aspects of U.S. economic power. Even hard line clerics admit to the advantages of economic cooperation with the U.S. Iran’s former president and current head of the powerful Expediency Council, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani said, “Iran has never banned economic, technological, and scientific relations with the America.”<sup>21</sup> If the U.S. were to take the lead in integrating Iran more

fully in the global economy, it will be in a better position to press for modifications in Iran's international conduct.<sup>22</sup> The administration should unconditionally abandon its policy of objecting to Iran's membership in the WTO. Another easy step for the U.S. would be to drop its opposition to the construction of gas and oil pipelines through Iran to the Central Asian States. Neither of these measures would require changes to laws or lifting of executive orders, nor do they require any direct Iran-U.S. contact. These first two actions could be used as confidence-building measures, the ultimate goal of which is to set the stage for incremental and conditional relaxation of sanctions. Lifting of sanctions, trade bans, and other punitive economic measures that are governed by U.S. laws could then be lifted based on a quid pro quo basis with regard to Iran's policies and behavior. The U.S. must create an economic opening in order to be in a better position to further use its economic power more effectively as "carrots" or "sticks" in areas of concern to the U.S. It is clear that the exclusive use of coercion in the economic arena has not worked; Iran has not modified its policies and the United States' unilateral economic isolation of Iran is causing friction with some of its allies. The United States has always taken the position that free trade paves the way for better governance and better lives for the people of nations that participate, Iran presents an opportunity to prove it.<sup>23</sup>

Iran's nuclear program is a source of national pride; in fact, the U.S encouraged the development of nuclear power plants during the Shah's regime and offered educational programs and incentives for students in that area of study.<sup>24</sup> Advocating the total abandonment of its nuclear program will not bear any fruit. The United States should address only the weapons development issue, specifically, the Iranian rationale for needing weapons, which is security. There appears to be some debate in Iran on whether the pursuit of nuclear weapons is the proper course to take. Those in favor of nuclear weapons capability use the argument that Iran is

surrounded by hostile forces, led by the United States, and the only way to counter the power of the U.S. and its allies is asymmetrically with nuclear weapons. The opposing camp argues that Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon will only further isolate Iran and drive its neighbors even further into the arms of the U.S. The administration can influence this debate by showing Iran that it does not need nuclear weapons. This should be done through two means. One, which has already been addressed, is the elimination of rhetoric that appears to threaten Iran. The second way is for the U.S. to engage Iran in multilateral talks on Afghanistan, Iraq and future Gulf security issues. This will serve three purposes; it will provide some transparency as to U.S. intentions in all three areas thereby easing Iranian concerns of "strategic encirclement"; it will provide a forum that enables Iran's interests to be considered; and it will acknowledge, albeit tacitly, Iran's desire to be recognized as a major player in its region. These actions by the United States coupled with the recent pressure on Iran by the international community may be enough to weaken the position of hard liners and dissuade Iran from continuing down its current path towards nuclear weapons.

To make progress on the issues of Iran's support for terrorism and its lack of support for the Middle East peace process the U.S. should, obviously, not alter its stance but should link changes in Iranian behavior to economic incentives. There are indications that the U.S. led war on terrorism has not gone unnoticed in Iran. Hashemi Rafsanjani has been quoted as saying "We should regulate our affairs in a manner so as not to give an excuse to the dinosaurs of the world."<sup>25</sup> Iran's support for terrorism and opposition to the peace process are not beyond the reach of pragmatism. Two recent examples involve Iran's relations with the European Union and Saudi Arabia. Iran had long made use of the policies of assassination of dissidents in Europe and the use of subversion in the Gulf States. After an assassination in 1997, the EU withdrew its

envoys from Iran and Germany imposed trade restrictions. Saudi Arabia made as one its conditions for normalizing relations with Iran the abandonment of its use of subversion in Gulf States. In both cases, Iran gave up its militant activities in favor of improved diplomatic and economic relations. These two cases show that Iran's policies and behavior can be moderated using diplomatic pressure in specific areas and/or with economic incentives.<sup>26</sup>

Dealing with Iran will be complex and difficult; however, Iran is too important for the United States to rely on its policy of coercion and containment. The United States has made great progress in its relations with China on shared objectives despite the existence of areas of disagreement between the two; the same logic can be applied to Iran. Mohammad Javad Larijani, advisor to Iran's supreme spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khameni, said it best, "We and the U.S. have many differences. But this does not mean that we cannot adopt a regular policy in view of our national interests."<sup>27</sup> One of the roads to peace, security, and U.S. national interests goes through Tehran. There is an opportunity to effect a positive change in Iran, but the U.S. will have to make the first move, and as the world's leader, it should. It is time for the U.S. to take action instead of maintaining the status quo in its strategy towards Iran. The U.S. should replace its ineffective containment strategy with its coercive policies and adopt a strategy of engagement with Iran. A tailored engagement strategy that capitalizes on Iran's pragmatic leanings and subtly empowers the reformers in Iran will eventually lead to a country that has a more representative government, is not a threat to its neighbors, and is not an adversary of the United States. In a report for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dr. George Perkovich summed it up best when he wrote, "No country is more difficult for the U.S. to engage than Iran. Still, we [the U.S.] should not accept defeat until innovative diplomacy has been tried and failed and the Iranian side has been found wanting."<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official Website, <<http://www.mfa.gov.ir>> (20 September 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States, 2002 (Washington, D.C. : GPO, 2002) , v.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Marschall, Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) , 24.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Tarock, Iran's Foreign Policy Since 1990: Pragmatism Supercedes Ideology (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1999), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony C. Cain, "Iran's Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction" (Maxwell Paper 26, Air War College, 2002): 5. Air University Library, (30 September 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Tarock, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Judith S. Yaphe, U.S.-Iran Relations: Normalization in the Future, National Defense University Strategic Forum 188 (Washington D.C. : NDU Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Tomaj Keyvani, "Reform or Revolution, Iran's Hard Choice," Asia Times.com, June 2003, <<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/html>> (23 September 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, <<http://www.netiran.com/Htdocs/Laws>> (18 September 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Marschall, 22.

<sup>11</sup> The Atlantic Council of the United States, U.S. Challenges and Choices in the Gulf: Iran and Proliferation Concerns, Policy Brief #6, 2002, <[http:// www.acus.org](http://www.acus.org)> (25 September 2003), Iran's Strategic Goals.

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<sup>12</sup> Shahid Beheshti, "Will Iran's Regime Change Next?," The Washington Quarterly 26, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 69. LexisNexis Academic Universe, (27 September 2003).

<sup>13</sup> The Atlantic Council of the United States, *The View from Tehran: Other Regional Considerations*.

<sup>14</sup> Ray Takeyh, "Re-Imaging U.S.-Iranian Relations" Survival 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2002) 25. Air University Library, (27 September 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment-Gulf States, <<http://www4.janes.com>> (12 Aug 03). EBSCOHOST, (22 Oct 03).

<sup>16</sup> Mohammad Khatami's speech to Iranian diplomats, British Broadcasting Corporation, (18 August 2003), LexisNexis Academic Universe, (16 September 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Iranian Student News Agency, "Foreign policy expert says Spain visit will help ties with EU," British Broadcasting Corporation, (27 October 2002), LexisNexis Academic Universe, (16 September 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: Current Developments and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service Issue Brief for Congress, (3 June 2003): 13. MIPALS, (20 September 2003).

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Senior U.S. Official Spells Out Dual Track U.S. Policy Toward Iran," U.S. Department of State International Information Programs, (2 August 2002), MIPALS, (9 October 2003).

<sup>20</sup> George Perkovich, "Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Challenge," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (28 April 2003): 9. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe, (25 September 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Takeyh, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Takeyh, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Perkovich, 13.

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<sup>24</sup> Cain, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Takeyh, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Takeyh, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Takeyh, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Perkovich, 3.

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